
PHILIPPE STAIB GALLERY

CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

Sculpture January-February 1992

Ruth Hardinger

Philippe Staib Gallery, New York

Loaded with sexual allusions, references to Central and South American mythology and potent physicality, Ruth Hardinger's new sculptures demonstrate her ability to confront mythic themes on her own terms. Hardinger describes her sculptures as "symbolic," as opposed to "abstract," owing to their heavy reliance on Mayan and other pre-Columbian peoples' culture. Yet the artist sifts her understanding of these myths through an American Midwestern upbringing to create sensuous, richly colored works.

All of the pieces in this show employed doughnut forms, either mounted individually on the floor or wall or stacked into phallic totems. These doughnuts work both as a generic symbol of natural cycles (and womanhood) and as direct invocation of the hoops found in Mexican mythology. In *Long Count* (1991) and *Red Long Count* (1991) Hardinger stacks her doughnuts like pillars toward the ceiling (the "long count" refers to a Mayan calendar system that starts at the beginning of time). Protruding knobs (also derived from Mayan carvings) create gaps between the individual rings, establishing a seemingly precarious balance. Made from layers of pigmented plaster, the doughnuts convey a sense of aging over time. However, the brilliant colors boldly announce their artifice.

In several works the lumpy texture is

supplemented by fragments of coral and/or bone. *Deseos Navigables* (1991), translated as *Navigable Desires*, involves three thick, stacked doughnuts of greenish brown inlaid with hunks of coral, shells, snake vertebrae and even a coyote skull. Looking inside reveals an unexpectedly smooth interior and, at its core, a yellow ball inlaid with crystalline kernels of corn, a reference to a poem by Cuban poet Maya Islas. The work also reveals the artist's ability to conjure images of eloquent beauty from otherwise ungainly forms.

This sexual symbolism reaches its logical apex with *Sun/Moon Piece* (1991), a single red doughnut, spliced open. The two legs meet each other in a smooth, yellow end and a white, concave end inlaid with shards of marble. This yellow sun and white moon, opposed to each other, refer to male and female via the Aztec myth about the perpetual contest of the warring male sun god and the female moon, whom he shatters into pieces in an eternal cycle. The center of the red doughnut is shaped into a labial oval, accenting its sexuality.

Because Hardinger so often invokes specific myths, the viewer who doesn't know her sources is left somewhat at a loss. Fortunately, the work is evocative enough to inspire reactions either way. One can't help thinking the artist might forgo direct allegory; she has already developed a potent symbolic language of her own.

—George Melrod

